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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fiftieth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 539th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 6 October 1999, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. PEREZ-HERNANDEZ (Spain)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

ANNUAL THEME: STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIP TO ENSURE PROTECTION, ALSO IN RELATION TO SECURITY (continued) (A/AC.96/923)

1. Mr. KULUE (Observer for Liberia) said that most present-day mass migration problems involving both internal and external displacement were occurring in third world countries, which were not always able to tackle the causes of forced migration. The concept of partnership was therefore crucially important. The current worldwide trend was to encourage regional partnerships for protection. Meanwhile, it was the responsibility of developed countries to create an environment that would enable regional groupings to become sustainable partners in implementing protection duties. Partnership for protection and regional security should be based on dialogue, properly ratified treaties and conventions, and strengthened economies.

2. In the West African subregion, the Liberian Government had continued to make use of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Mano River Union (comprising Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea) to identify lasting solutions to the problems of insecurity and economic coexistence in the subregion. Despite its immense efforts to sustain peace, dissidents based in Guinea had made military incursions into Liberia. Areas of the country bordering on Guinea were host to large numbers of Liberians returning from asylum countries and tens of thousands of refugees from Sierra Leone. Refugees and returnees were constantly on the move and the security of both persons and property had deteriorated. The Government had therefore approved a transfer of refugees from Northern Lofa to a refugee centre at Sinje and allocated considerable resources to the programme. Security had been restored in Lofa County and a humanitarian assessment mission was due to visit the affected area.

3. The Liberian Government lacked the necessary means to defend the country's sovereignty and integrity in the face of the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations, which meant that the dissidents could renew their attacks with impunity. The embargo should be lifted. In addition, the cut-off date for the repatriation of Liberian refugees in Guinea should be extended to enable them to return home in conditions of safety and dignity. UNHCR's mandate was at present limited to externally displaced persons, but the problem of internally displaced persons was becoming ever more acute. The Executive Committee should therefore authorize UNHCR to offer direct assistance to internally displaced Liberians. Although repatriation was the best solution to the refugee crisis, it should not be bought at the price of security. Liberia was committed to the maintenance of peace and security in the West African subregion and the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers in its territory. The international community should help it to honour that pledge.

4. Mr. DJINNIT (Organization of African Unity) said that Africa was home to more than one third of all the world's refugees. UNHCR should be commended for its efforts to assist African refugees, but the international community and especially donor countries had paid inadequate attention to the problem. Host countries were experiencing increasing difficulties in honouring their traditional duty of hospitality to refugees. As the High Commissioner had noted in her introductory statement, the situation of African refugees was tragic. The international community should endeavour to support Africa's efforts to deal with refugees, returnees and

displaced persons; to that end, it should launch regional and multisectoral rehabilitation, reconstruction and development initiatives. The fiftieth session of the Executive Committee coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Organization of African Unity's Refugee Convention which had helped to alleviate refugees' suffering and ensure their protection. When the Convention had been adopted in 1969, there had been fewer than 1 million refugees in Africa, hailing mainly from countries that were fighting to free themselves from the yoke of colonialism or apartheid. Today, there were nearly 7 million refugees in Africa and almost 20 million displaced persons. Most of those population movements had been precipitated by conflicts, and refugees and displaced persons could in turn become a source of misunderstanding or even conflict between countries of origin and host countries. Refugees were increasingly less welcome in countries which were experiencing enormous socio-economic problems of their own. The situation deserved the undivided attention of the international community and host countries needed all the support they could get.

5. Another problem was the overlap between politics and humanitarian questions. The infiltration of refugee populations by armed elements had further complicated the task of humanitarian institutions and personnel. Accordingly, OAU had decided to tackle the management, settlement and causes of conflicts through its prevention mechanism. Those efforts had not been in vain, for they had recently borne fruit in the peace agreements in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and intensive efforts were under way to find a solution to the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as the crises which had erupted in Burundi and the Comoros.

6. The OAU and its member States were firmly committed to the promotion of democracy, the sound management of public affairs and respect for and the protection of human rights, which were indispensable for the Organization's major area of interest, namely, sustainable development. Africa was waiting for the international community to signal its political will to act as a partner in that enterprise.

7. Mr. PHONGSAVATH (Observer for Lao People's Democratic Republic) said that the magnitude of the global refugee crisis was very alarming. The number of people covered by the High Commissioner's mandate had risen exponentially. There were currently 22 million refugees worldwide. Refugee populations not only posed a threat to stability and peace in the regions concerned, but also impaired their development. No sooner had a crisis in one part of the world been resolved than another would erupt elsewhere; the victims were usually innocent and belonged to the most vulnerable sections of society. The underlying causes were familiar: bloody ethnic conflicts and religious differences, political instability, social injustice and human rights abuses. The deterioration of the economic situation in certain areas of the world was also a factor and another more serious problem should be noted, namely, the growing tendency to interfere in the internal affairs of States. A just and lasting solution should be found and UNHCR should continue to pay special attention to protection needs, particularly in conflict and post-conflict situations.

8. The implementation of international protection principles was central to building a peaceful world where the ideals of refugee protection and the search for lasting solutions would be translated into effective action. Refugee protection was the shared responsibility of all countries. Based on its humanitarian policy proclaimed in 1977, the Lao Government had

continued to welcome all Lao refugees residing abroad who wished to return to their homeland in conditions of safety and dignity. The current rate of repatriation was 300 persons a month and the final group was expected to return in mid-December 1999. The Lao Government fully agreed with the High Commissioner's view that the ideal objective was to create conditions in which refugees could make a free and informed choice about their future. Once again, in order to implement lasting solutions for Lao returnees and ensure their reintegration, his Government called on the international community and UNHCR to help the Lao People's Democratic Republic fulfil its obligations.

9. Mr. CHANG Man-soon (Observer for the Republic of Korea) said that, despite UNHCR's tireless efforts to seek lasting solutions to the refugee problem, the situation had not significantly improved since the Executive Committee's last session. In fact, the past year had been very difficult. Ethnic, religious and political conflicts had led to systematic human rights violations, blatant disregard of humanitarian law and wholesale expulsions of populations. Moreover, as the Standing Committee had indicated, a growing number of States had given preference to domestic concerns at the expense of international responsibilities and had gradually moved away from a law-based or rights-based approach to refugee protection towards what might be termed discretionary arrangements. Additionally, in some areas of the world, there were persons living in refugee-like situations, outside their country of origin, who were not officially recognized as refugees. UNHCR should place more emphasis on protecting them for humanitarian reasons. The protection of refugees, which was difficult at the best of times, had been complicated by the presence of armed combatants among refugee populations. The problem of insecurity confronting humanitarian workers was another topic of great concern to the international community.

10. UNHCR had acknowledged that it could not face those challenges alone. It could perform its functions effectively only in well-coordinated cooperation with States, international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dealing with human rights, peacekeeping and development matters.

11. Since its admission to the United Nations in 1991, the Republic of Korea had actively participated in the Organization's humanitarian assistance programmes, including the protection of refugees. During the Kosovo crisis, for example, it had stood shoulder to shoulder with the international community. The Republic of Korea had also taken a strong interest in the protection of humanitarian workers and had initiated an open debate on the issue during its presidency of the Security Council in 1997. His Government was currently seeking membership of the Executive Committee of UNHCR and was grateful to the members of the Committee which had supported its application. The Republic of Korea had also participated in various activities aimed at strengthening partnership with UNHCR, such as the workshop on contingency planning held in Seoul in November 1998. UNHCR should play a central role in the coordination of such international cooperation and the Republic of Korea would continue to support its efforts in that regard.

12. Mr. NKURUNZIZA (Observer for Burundi) said that the unfortunate events following the coup d'état in Burundi in 1993 had led to massacres and major population displacements. There were currently 500,000 internally displaced persons in the country and another 300,000 of his compatriots had chosen the path of exile. Faced with such a massive humanitarian disaster,

the Government had taken a series of steps to create a political climate favourable to the refugees' return. The national reconciliation programme comprised six sections: a process of return to security and peace, the establishment of political dialogue, education for peace and tolerance, the drafting of core texts enshrining respect for human rights, the implementation of major reforms in the justice system and the relocation and reintegration of returnees and displaced persons.

13. Burundi was of course prepared to contribute to the strengthening of partnership to protect refugees, but its ability to act was limited by a number of constraints. First of all, it faced economic problems resulting mainly from the unfair and illegal economic blockade imposed on it by its neighbours and the unacceptable politicization of the refugee repatriation process. In that regard, it was most anxious for UNHCR to move on from the phase of facilitating the repatriation of Burundian refugees in the United Republic of Tanzania to the phase of promoting repatriation, especially as peace had now been re-established in 12 of the country's 16 provinces. Another problem was the failure to respect international conventions concerning the placement of refugee camps as far as possible from the border of the country of origin. As a result, members of armed groups had slipped into the camps and intimidated potential returnees with impunity. Finally, his Government deplored the international community's indifference to the dissemination of ethnic hatred through the press in certain countries by associations of Burundian refugees.

14. One of the biggest challenges facing Burundi was the security issue. In order to deal with the problem, the Government had launched an operation to protect the civilian population in one of the provinces where pockets of insecurity had persisted. The operation involved grouping the population in protected facilities, thereby preventing the rebels from using them as human shields. In disregard of the truth, the enemies of peace had been quick to label those facilities as concentration camps. The representatives of the international community in Burundi could vouch that the operation was justified.

15. Some 500,000 internally displaced people in Burundi were still not covered by UNHCR's mandate. Consequently, they had not benefited from the same assistance as returnees living on the same hillsides and undergoing the same privations, a situation that was obviously not conducive to a perception of social justice. UNHCR should extend assistance to those displaced persons. His Government was also counting on the cooperation of the international community, in particular UNHCR and host countries, to encourage the voluntary return of refugees, which was the ideal solution. It would also be helpful if, in addition to essential supplies, UNHCR could provide the returnees with corrugated iron sheets to enable them to build adequate shelter and thereby make a contribution to their social and vocational reintegration. The international community had a moral duty to offer humanitarian solutions that would inspire hope in the world's have-nots.

16. Mr. AL-DOURI (Observer for Iraq) said that, at the present time, refugee flows were associated not only with armed conflicts, but also with internal conflicts, ethnic hatred, socio-economic changes and sanctions imposed by certain countries. Thus, in Iraq, the serious demographic and social consequences of the embargo imposed more than 10 years before had resulted in a significant drift off the land and the emigration of young people in search of work. But despite those difficulties, Iraq was committed to fulfilling its obligation to protect refugees

from neighbouring countries and helping UNHCR to run the refugee camps in its territory. It should also be stressed that Iraqi protection for refugees went beyond the purely humanitarian sphere, since the Government allowed them to practise a profession which would facilitate their reintegration into their country of origin upon return.

17. His Government had helped to alleviate UNHCR's financial burden of protecting refugees in Iraq. Every refugee had been provided with a ration and supply book, just like Iraqi citizens. But owing to the worsening economic situation caused by the embargo, the Iraqi Government had requested UNHCR to review the volume of resources which it allocated to refugee camps in Iraq, in proportion to their population. In addition, UNHCR should extend the same level of assistance to refugees in camps in southern Iraq, particularly around Basra, as it offered to refugees in central and northern Iraq. UNHCR was to be commended for its repatriation and reintegration programmes, which had already benefited 2,400 refugees in Iraq. The Government had nevertheless noted that the reintegration of foreign refugees in the autonomous region had enabled a large number of Kurds to enter Iraq, and that was unacceptable. Refugee protection programmes should be implemented in good faith without dangerous politicization.

18. Mr. KOZLAJ (Observer for Albania) said that recent events in Kosovo had demonstrated the value of UNHCR's 50-year experience of dealing with crises in a spirit of partnership. In Kosovo, such partnership had taken the form of a broad front in which each participant had acted in accordance with defined objectives. For the first time, a military organization, namely the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), had cooperated with other international and regional organizations to lend assistance to hundreds of thousands of Kosovars. For its part, Albania had immediately associated itself with the international partnership structures that had been put in place. That association had been encouraged by the political will of the Albanian Government and the existence of an appropriate national legal framework. As a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and other relevant international instruments, Albania had made all the necessary amendments to its legislation in order to improve the status of refugees. The organizations set up to achieve that objective had been able, in cooperation with international humanitarian institutions, efficiently to administer the complex situation caused by the Kosovo crisis. Since the crisis has not yet been settled, the Government was currently making efforts not only to take care of the refugees who remained in Albania, but also to welcome other groups which might enter the country during the winter.

19. His delegation joined with others in calling for greater efforts to protect ethnic groups which had been subjected to violence. Such acts were incompatible with the peaceful intentions of the Kosovar people. The perpetrators often remained unidentified. Their actions could be attributed to elements which sought to sow ethnic and racial hatred and undermine the international community's efforts to calm the situation and re-establish normal conditions of life. Elements responsible for shedding blood should be brought to justice as soon as possible in order to calm tempers and thereby clarify the situation of Serbs and Roma in Kosovo.

20. Mr. MKANDAWIRE (Observer for Malawi) said that the magnitude of the refugee problem, especially in developing countries, necessitated a partnership based on the principles of solidarity and cooperation with UNHCR, regional organizations such as the OAU, NGOs and host countries. Although efforts had been made to strengthen international cooperation, the

majority of countries with large refugee populations had received only very limited international assistance, whereas their needs were constantly increasing. The international community should not remain indifferent to the plight of the African continent, which was home to the largest populations of refugees and displaced persons.

21. Malawi was a party to a number of international instruments concerning refugees and was committed to fulfilling its obligations. At the same time, however, security considerations were of paramount importance. Malawi had accepted a small number of refugees from the Great Lakes region and the horn of Africa and was closely monitoring the situation in those areas, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The international community should put pressure on the warring parties to ensure the implementation of the recently signed Lusaka peace accords and enable the refugees to return home. Pending that development, his Government had launched a programme to allocate plots of land to refugees and thereby promote their self-sufficiency.

22. Mr. JAH (Observer for Sierra Leone) said that the theme of the Executive Committee's fiftieth session was very important, particularly for the 463,000 Sierra Leonean refugees in Liberia and Guinea. Rebel infiltration into the refugee camps in Guinea and the violence which had occurred in the camps in Liberia were worrying developments which had prompted his Government to appeal to UNHCR to intensify its refugee protection role. For the time being, voluntary repatriation could not be organized by UNHCR owing to the slow pace of implementation of the Lome peace accords. However, most of the Sierra Leonean refugees located along the border would return home spontaneously once the security situation improved. Although the repair of homes and other social infrastructures and the creation of job opportunities did not fall within UNHCR's mandate, it remained a fact that repatriation had to be accompanied by reintegration programmes. UNHCR should also take account of the plight of internally displaced persons, estimated at 1.3 million.

23. The Sierra Leonean economy had been entirely devastated by eight years of war and the Government was currently incapable of satisfying the needs of a largely deprived population. However, a programme of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration had already been launched and the assistance of the international community was required to consolidate peace and stimulate the economy. His delegation wished to thank those West African countries, particularly Guinea and Liberia, which had accepted refugees and worked to bring about a return to peace in Sierra Leone.

24. U MAUNG HTAY (Observer for Myanmar) said that the term "refugee" required clarification in view of the complex nature of population movements and irregular migrations. In certain cases, people who lived in border areas moved in search of a better income, better living conditions and better opportunities abroad, often illegally. That was a natural phenomenon tolerated by the host country. In times of economic crisis, however, receiving States tended to be more sensitive and brought the matter to the attention of international agencies. In other cases, refugees who crossed borders to obtain refugee status when no natural disaster or armed conflict had caused their displacement were abusers of asylum procedures who attempted to circumvent immigration restrictions.

25. The root cause of the problem was the gulf between rich and poor. In addition, certain countries were unable to exploit their natural resources owing to internal instability or external measures such as economic sanctions, blockades or embargoes imposed by more powerful States. Refugees and displaced persons were thus a source of tension in inter-State relations. Respect for immigration laws and State sovereignty would obviate such problems. Myanmar was prepared to cooperate with all parties concerned to address the issue.

26. Mr. SINYINZA (Observer for Zambia) said that there were currently about 190,000 refugees from Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia in Zambian territory. As the Zambian President had recently remarked, there was an imbalance between the level of assistance for African refugees and the level of assistance for refugees in developed countries. However difficult the economic situation in many parts of the world, refugee assistance should be distributed on a more equitable basis throughout the world. Zambia appreciated UNHCR's assistance in looking after refugees and intended to put such assistance to good use in terms of improving refugee settlements, health services, educational facilities and other infrastructure projects. His Government was also grateful to the European Union and various donors including Japan, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Italy for the assistance they had provided.

27. The refugee influxes had been caused by the conflict and peace process in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the current instability in Angola. The Zambian economy was in dire straits, mainly owing to debt servicing. As a result, there were no domestic resources available to take care of refugees. The Government was therefore hopeful that the donor community would continue to offer support and, in the meantime, it was committed to protecting refugees and demonstrating transparency in the use of any assistance received.

28. The partnership between the Zambian Government, UNHCR and other implementing partners had borne fruit in the form of training workshops for the various Government departments concerned, especially at refugee points of entry, in order to raise awareness of the refugees' plight and ensure their protection.

29. Mr. GALLEGOS CHIRIBOGA (Observer for Ecuador) said that the document on the annual theme (A/AC.96/923) was a sound basis for a fruitful exchange of views. The basic aim of collaboration between UNHCR and its various partners was to improve the effectiveness of all UNHCR activities in assisting refugees. Since refugee protection was UNHCR's principal concern, it was essential to strengthen that element by appealing to other actors to achieve similar goals while basing their work on humanitarian law. Refugee crises necessitated a common approach, whence the concept of pooling the efforts of international organizations, States and civil society in order to protect refugees' rights, identify lasting solutions and, most important of all, take preventive action. Numerous conflicts and violations of human rights and humanitarian law had endangered the lives of the staff of humanitarian organizations, among others, accordingly, as specified by article 35 of the 1951 Convention, States should cooperate with UNHCR "to facilitate its duty of supervising the application of the provisions of the Convention". The same obligation devolved on intergovernmental organizations, private associations and civil society as a whole. The Kosovo crisis had offered an example of partnership in which an international presence had made it possible to strengthen protection for thousands of refugees and monitor the security of humanitarian field staff.

30 The problem of refugees affected developing countries in particular, imposing a burden on their economic, financial and social policy. There was an imperative need to take measures to lessen the impact of refugee crises. UNHCR's coordination role and the cooperation of the international community were essential in repatriation and reintegration. The protection of refugees also required concerted international action.

31 The increasing incidence of forced displacement owing to the internal situation in Ecuador's neighbour, Colombia, was a matter of serious concern. UNHCR should strengthen its protection mandate in the region. His Government was pleased that an agreement had been concluded to establish a UNHCR liaison office in Quito which would form part of UNHCR's regional office for northern Latin America.

32 Ms. AKUSHEVA (Observer for Kazakhstan) stressed the symbolic importance of the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee at the dawn of the twenty-first century, a time when the United Nations and the international community were endeavouring to build a universal system of protection based on global partnership. Unfortunately, the international political situation was characterized by disturbing trends such as increased refugee flows all over the world precipitated by military conflicts, ethnic tensions, religious extremism and environmental disasters. In such circumstances, it was essential to strengthen cooperation between all competent authorities both in terms of programme activities and joint projects. States themselves must actively develop international relations and participate in joint programmes to avoid competition when appealing to donors. Owing to the phenomenon of "donor fatigue", UNHCR had a duty to make the best use of available resources, avoid projects which pursued exclusively political goals and give preference to prevention activities. Such activities should seek to strengthen the national capacities of States in areas of potential instability. As part of its mandate, UNHCR should encourage constructive dialogue between Governments, national human rights institutions, NGOs and the private sector.

33 The impact of military confrontation and political instability was especially obvious in Central Asia, where States in the region were threatened by an influx of Afghan refugees and the ongoing Tajik refugee crisis. Illegal migration had made the situation even more difficult, since the region had become a transit corridor for people heading for the economically stable States of Europe and for drugs and arms traffickers. It would be beneficial if UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) could organize a regional conference on issues relating to refugee and migrants with a view to developing joint programmes in the Central Asian States. On the question of forced migration from certain areas affected by environmental disasters, such as the Aral Sea and Caspian Sea regions, a partnership based on joint programmes was essential and UNHCR should share its experience in that regard. Central Asian States were also keen to strengthen cooperation with other regions, especially within the framework of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Her Government hoped that the regulation of refugee and migrant flows would be raised at the forthcoming OSCE summit in Istanbul.

34 As a party to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, Kazakhstan had committed itself to drawing up appropriate national legislative provisions. The Government also wished to participate in the multisectoral programmes run by UNHCR and IOM aimed at strengthening national capacity. The initiative launched by UNHCR, IOM and Microsoft to develop a

computer-based registration system during the Kosovo crisis was very interesting and similar programmes could be developed to regulate flows of refugees and migrants. The Government also hoped to put UNHCR assistance to good use in helping ethnic Kazakhs move back to Kazakhstan and adapt to the new economic realities in the country, thereby forestalling social tensions. While commending the work of UNHCR's regional office in Kazakhstan, her Government believed that its activities should be oriented towards more specific projects in order to make effective use of available financial resources.

35. Mr. MUKARO (Observer for Zimbabwe) said that no one agency could offer the entire range of services which refugees required and, consequently, partnership between different actors was essential. Zimbabwe's refugee programme had been tripartite in nature since its inception in the 1980s. It brought together the Government, UNHCR and NGOs. Important decisions or changes could be made only following consultations among the three partners. Under the programme, the Government was responsible for ensuring the protection and security of refugees, in accordance with the 1951 Convention, its 1967 Protocol and the OAU Refugee Convention of 1969. Zimbabwe was a party to all those instruments.

36. It was everybody's business to ensure that refugees integrated smoothly into their host community and all the agencies involved were responsible for keeping the local community informed so as to avert possible xenophobia. Furthermore, refugees were involved in the management of relief aid and together with resource providers were held accountable for resource allocation. To enable refugees to exercise their right to education and employment and their right to determine their own future, NGOs were financing a range of projects, either autonomously or in conjunction with UNHCR, for educational scholarships, income-generating projects and assistance in securing employment.

37. Refugees were often motivated by a strong desire for revenge and they had to be helped to understand that only tolerance could lead to peaceful coexistence. The process of peace-building in their respective countries could start while they were still in exile and agencies which provided services to refugees should perform that function in order to encourage the reconciliation process. Since repatriation was the most desirable solution, the service-providing agencies preparing refugees for their return should offer education and skills training which could be useful when they went home.

38. When internal conflicts lay at the root of international refugee flows, all States, and especially neighbouring States, should work together to restore peace and security in the country beset by conflict. Countries of asylum obviously carried the heaviest burden during refugee crises because the presence of refugees was a source of tension and a drain on already slender resources. It was only by working together and complementing each other's resources that States, NGOs and UNHCR would be able to ensure the protection of refugees.

39. Mr. BOUKAR (Observer for the Niger) said that the Niger had promulgated a law on the status of refugees which, together with its implementing decree, The existing national and international legal instruments were complemented by a national commission on eligibility which dealt with refugee issues and had enabled the Niger to administer more efficiently the increasing numbers of distressed refugees seeking a place of asylum.

40. Notwithstanding its good will, the Niger lacked the appropriate resources and capacity to tackle refugee crises, and that was why the theme of the present session seemed to be very timely. Humanitarian questions were more than ever a minefield and a challenge which no State or organization, however great its resources or capacity, could address individually on an effective and lasting basis. It was essential to pool intellectual resources. Strengthening the partnership approach was therefore an efficient means of ensuring protection and security.

41. The Niger set great store by partnership because its own experience in that field had been positive. The tripartite agreements which it had signed with Algeria and UNHCR, and Burkina Faso and UNHCR, had made possible the successful repatriation of thousands of refugees from the Niger, Mali and Chad. The success of the various operations had been the result of the mutual trust between the States involved and the support of UNHCR and other partners. Since 1998, the Niger had benefited from a socio-economic reintegration programme for returnees. Unfortunately, at precisely the moment when the Niger had had the greatest need of UNHCR to follow those various programmes through, UNHCR had wound down its activities by cutting two officials from the staff at its Niamey office. But national reconciliation and the establishment of a lasting peace depended to a large extent on the programme's success.

42. Mr. NETO (Observer for Angola) said that the increase in the number of displaced persons and refugees in Angola had caused the Government to concentrate on activities falling within the purview of the annual theme. More than half the Angolan population was internally displaced and over 500,000 Angolans had been obliged to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. Domestically, the Government had worked with its international partners to strengthen the institutional capacity of the agencies dealing with refugees and displaced persons and improve the mechanisms for their protection, assistance and social reintegration. In addition, the Government had taken action to deepen the democratization of society and enhance respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the country.

43. Regarding the attitude of the international community to the problem of refugees in Africa, and especially Angola, more pressure should be brought to bear on those responsible for precipitating armed conflicts in the subregion and on Jonas Savimbi to disarm his men in the spirit of the Lusaka accords. The Security Council should also assume its responsibilities as the body responsible for maintaining collective peace and security, given that armed conflicts were the principal cause of movements of refugees and displaced persons.

44. Angola wished to thank donor countries and urged them to fund UNHCR's operational programmes and special funds. They should also respond favourably to the various international appeals launched by the United Nations because, in the current context of globalization, the social, political and economic stability of individual countries was a precondition for international stability and security.

45. Mr. PETOCZ (Observer for Slovakia) said that partnership was important in two areas, namely, the prevention of conflicts which caused refugee flows and the transition from relief to sustainable development. As far as conflict prevention was concerned, close cooperation within the United Nations system, particularly with the Security Council, UNHCR and other human

rights bodies, was most important. Partnerships with regional organizations were also essential. With regard to the transition to sustainable development, Slovakia appreciated new initiatives such as the Brookings Process, which had been jointly sponsored by UNHCR and the World Bank.

46. The administration of Kosovo by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), in close cooperation with OSCE, the European Union and NATO, was an excellent example of a comprehensive approach to refugee crises which Slovakia wished to see extended to other areas of the world. The new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, including Slovakia, had played a very active role in the Kosovo relief operation. Regional solidarity had naturally been a factor, but their commitment had also been underpinned by a growing awareness on the part of Governments and populations alike that they had a responsibility to resolve international problems. Slovakia had provided humanitarian assistance and taken part in the humanitarian evacuation programme. It had cooperated very closely with UNHCR, both directly and through UNHCR's liaison office in Bratislava.

47. It was essential to ensure the security of staff working for humanitarian organizations and their unrestricted access to problem areas and greater efforts by the Security Council and regional organizations were required to that end. The reform of the Security Council and the strengthening of the mandate of peacekeeping forces could restore hope in neglected areas.

48. Partnerships with the private sector, NGOs, civil society and the media could also be valuable. Insufficient attention had been paid to partnerships with the media, bearing in mind that, without media coverage, events simply did not happen. Greater efforts should also be made to instil in children and young people a feeling of solidarity with people who were suffering all over the world.

49. Since opening its borders in 1990, Slovakia had become a transit country for people heading for Western Europe. In the past two years the number of asylum-seekers, particularly from Central and Southern Asian countries, had mushroomed, and that had prompted the Slovak Government to amend its asylum legislation and bring it into line with European Union standards. Slovakia awaited with interest the results of the Tampere Summit, which was due to examine the European Union's policy on migration and asylum. Slovakia favoured the adoption of minimum standards for asylum procedures.

50. Ms. RUSTAM (Observer for Indonesia) said that the humanitarian situation in East Timor was of very serious concern to her Government because, more than any other country, Indonesia had to deal with the direct consequences. The Indonesian Government, which was sincerely trying to resolve the East Timor problem in a peaceful and democratic manner, strongly condemned the violence which had erupted there since the announcement of the results of the popular consultation. Those acts of violence had been the work of pro-autonomy groups dissatisfied with the way in which the ballot had been held. Homes, buildings and shops belonging to both pro-independence and pro-integration communities had been burned, as well as a number of public buildings. Hundreds of thousands of people had fled to the interior of East Timor, West Timor and other parts of Indonesia. To help those displaced persons, the Government had launched a massive humanitarian operation, despite the economic difficulties besetting the country.

51. Fully realizing that the crisis necessitated concerted efforts and partnerships, the Indonesian Government had provided full cooperation in channelling the international humanitarian assistance provided by foreign countries and international relief agencies and had even requested the Jakarta office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to coordinate those activities. Her Government welcomed the High Commissioner's recent visit to Indonesia and West Timor and intended to back UNHCR's planned emergency relief programme, especially the security aspect, thereby enabling it to carry out its activities.

52. The Indonesian President had guaranteed the right of displaced persons to return to their homes in East Timor, should they wish to do so, and as soon as the situation permitted. In that connection, the Indonesian Government, UNDP and UNHCR were scheduled to sign a memorandum of agreement on 7 October regarding a repatriation programme based on the voluntary return principle. Her Government was convinced that peace, stability and prosperity in East Timor could be achieved only through a genuine reconciliation between the various groups in the territory, whose disagreements dated back to the civil war of 1975.

53. The Indonesian President had announced that the Government would honour and accept the result of the ballot and had pledged to take the necessary constitutional measures to terminate Indonesia's link with East Timor, in accordance with the agreement reached in New York. The Indonesian Government had accepted the presence of Interfet to help restore security, law and order in East Timor. It would do all it could to guarantee peace and stability until the results of the ballot had been endorsed by the People's Consultative Assembly.

54. Mr. LADER KARL (International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)) said that NGOs welcomed the growing acknowledgement that they should be involved in refugee protection as key partners, both in situations of mass displacement and in individual protection. They also welcomed the proposed revitalization of the Partnership in Action (PARinAC) process. The partnership between Governments, UNHCR and NGOs at the Conference of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) had strengthened civil society and built a network of NGOs concerned with displacement questions. In addition, NGOs would participate in the work of the Standing Committee as observers, at least in the year 2000.

55. Partnership with refugees needed to be strengthened. A community-based approach must be the basis on which refugee assistance was assessed and implemented. While it was first and foremost the responsibility of Governments to protect human rights, the United Nations, international organizations and NGOs should also intervene in the event of serious violations. NGOs were deeply alarmed by the current crises in the Northern Caucasus and East Timor which the international community had been unable to prevent. It was a matter of extreme concern that double standards had been used when protecting and assisting refugees and displaced persons.

56. Protection should not be based on refugee law alone; it should also make full use of the broad framework of international human rights instruments. During the past year, the right to request and obtain asylum had been threatened in many regions. The use of unlawful and inappropriate control mechanisms such as arbitrary detention, refusal of entry at border crossings and the imposition of prohibitions and sanctions against hauliers had weakened the international protection regime. To counteract those threats to the institution of asylum, active participation

by NGOs was required in drawing up regulations, establishing monitoring networks and implementing conflict-prevention mechanisms. Governments should recognize the expertise of NGOs in that field and refrain from treating them as opponents.

57. The involvement of the military in the provision of security for refugees was important, but their increased participation in humanitarian assistance, which often compromised basic humanitarian principles, was a worrying development. The physical security of refugee women and children was a matter of real concern and NGOs welcomed the attention paid to that issue by UNHCR. In a number of areas where, for security reasons, UNHCR, international organizations and international NGOs had been denied access to refugees and displaced persons, local NGOs could be of some limited assistance. But it was when there was no international presence that refugees and displaced persons were most at risk.

58. NGOs shared many of the concerns expressed by UNHCR in its note on international protection (A/AC.96/914) and other documents dealing with detention, statelessness and family protection. Governments should incorporate the main issues raised in those documents into the protection conclusions. As the High Commissioner had indicated in her preliminary remarks, the forthcoming European Union summit in Tampere should be visionary and forward-looking rather than simply setting a lowest common denominator.

59. NGOs wanted to be more closely involved in formulating the conclusions of the Executive Committee and they hoped that a reform of its procedures would enable them to play a more active role. In the absence of a single organization mandated to meet the protection and assistance needs of internally displaced persons, increased partnership between international organizations themselves and between international organizations and NGOs was more important than ever. NGOs wholeheartedly endorsed the conclusion of the note on international protection that "the protection of refugees is not only an ethical and legal imperative but also a prudent insurance policy for an uncertain future".

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.